

oral histories of political prisoners

The Final Straw Radio - Sept 10, 2023



Josh Davidson from the *Certain Days: Freedom For Political Prisoners* Calendar talks about the upcoming book that he co-edited with political prisoner Eric King from AK Press entitled *RATTLING THE CAGES: Oral Histories of North American Political Prisoners*, containing over 450 pages of first hand experiences of resisting from within the belly of the beast across generations and movements in Turtle Island.

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TFSR: Josh, welcome back. Would you introduce yourself for the audience with your name, preferred pronouns, political identity, and any other projects that you want to mention?

Josh Davidson: Sure. Thanks so much for having me back, Bursts. It's a pleasure to be back. My name is Josh, he/him pronouns. I'm an abolitionist and an anarchist. And I'm involved in a few different projects, one of which is the Certain Days: Freedom for Political Prisoners calendar, which is a fundraiser for political prisoners that's released every year. And also the children's art project, which is with political prisoner Oso Blanco. We take indigenous artwork from people in prison and put it on greeting cards, and then sell those and raise money for the Zapatistas. Finally, I also worked in communications with the Zinn Education Project, which promotes the teaching of radical people's history in classrooms and provides free lessons and resources for educators.

TFSR: Great. And you're also the co-editor of a new book coming out from AK Press that's in presale right now called *Rattling the Cages*, which you co-edited with Eric King.

JD: Thanks for throwing that in there.

TFSR: And that's what we're going to talk about first. Would you tell listeners a little bit about the book and who the intended audience is for it?

JD: Sure, absolutely. It's called *Rattling the Cages: Oral Histories of North American Political Prisoners*, and that's released by AK Press. And it's something that political prisoner Eric King and I have been editing and working on for the last several years. I interviewed about 40 current or former political prisoners about their lives inside and what they learned and how they survived to maintain their politics. This book is the culmination of all of that. As far as the intended audience, it's really geared towards two different audiences. One would be committed radicals, and maybe people who have done time who just want to learn this history and understand better the commitments that these people have taken. The second intended audience

would be younger activists, people who aren't aware of this history or are just getting involved in radical actions, or even, as we saw recently, the recent RICO defendants down in Atlanta and Cop City. I think that this could be an excellent resource for them for the potential time that they are facing.

TF SR: It's interesting to hear the experiences of people who have done time and who have held to an ethical stance during it. But one of the things that made me want to ask that question was because the framing that a lot of people bring to their answers includes the "here's kind of what to expect, here's how to handle yourself." Like an experiential guide or a handing down of direct practical wisdom. I mean, stories and experiences of historical events is great and personal, uplifting, or tragedy moments, but also this "Hey, so as committed radicals, this is a thing that could happen to you whether, because you decide to take an action that you're very public about, or because you get railroaded with charges and the court system just shoves you in a cage."

JD: Yeah. And that was very intentional. There were a lot of questions. We might get into this more later. But I wanted to mix the questions a little bit having to do with history and with our experiences, but also with what you said, with practical knowledge, with things that will help people in the future that may face similar obstacles.

TF SR: The book is definitely the epitome of an inside-outside collaboration. And on that note, I wonder if you could talk about your co-editor, for anyone who doesn't know who Eric is, how he was inspired to start this project, and the process of working together while Eric's been going through all this repression and attempted silencing by the state.

JD: Absolutely. Eric King is a political prisoner. He's an anarchist, a vegan, and an anti-racist. He was imprisoned in 2014 following the politically motivated property destruction in Kansas City, Missouri, after the police murder of Michael Brown. He received 10 years in prison, and he's due to be released in February 2024. So in about six months. But during his time

in prison, it's been the thing of activists' nightmares. He's been assaulted by guards and Nazis. He's been kept in the worst possible conditions and solitary confinement for years and years. But he's never lost hope, and we've been communicating for years and years now. He's always been enamored by our elders from liberation movements that came before: from the American Indian Movement, from the Black Panther Party, from anti-racist whites who acted in solidarity with them. And we've always talked about the commitment that political prisoners from those movements have been able to exhibit. In the midst of mail bans, in the midst of constant communication restrictions and pervasive repression, he's maintained that interest and that commitment that he sees with former political prisoners, and he's been interested in making sure that other people are aware of that, are aware of that commitment and the struggles that these people have gone through. That was really the early inspiration for this.

Another inspiration was that Eric and I have really built our relationship on reading books and discussing them, initially anyway. And one of those books was *Say Nothing*, which was about the IRA and *The Troubles*. And reading that book was the early impetus. It showed him the importance of oral histories and of capturing the experiences and struggles of people who've been through the worst. One thing I also wanted to mention, is an interesting tidbit related to this, during one of Eric's Many mail bans when he wasn't allowed to have any mail except for from his immediate family, he suggested that I write to Oso Blanco. This was probably six or seven years ago, and we have both always been interested in him. Oso Blanco is a very interesting political prisoner and an indigenous person. I started writing to Oso Blanco, and we started what I mentioned earlier, the children's art project, to highlight the artwork of indigenous prisoners and to support the Zapatista movement down in Chiapas. So even in our not being able to communicate, Eric's been able to help create different projects that have benefited different people.

TFSR: Yeah, that's great. We've spoken about Oso Blanco on the show before, but would you remind folks a little bit about his case and his activity. He shows up in the book, obviously, as one of the interviewees.

JD: Oso Blanco has been in prison since 1999. He's an indigenous activist, and he's imprisoned for expropriating money and supplies for the Zapatistas, for robbing banks and giving those funds to the movement down in Southern Mexico. He's been in prison for about 25 years now. And he's still facing another 40 years in prison. So the struggle to get him out is very strong. But he's an amazing person, an amazing writer, an amazing artist. He's got two books out. Three if you include this one that he's also included in. And you can find out more about him and his website freesosoblanco.org

TFSR: Can you talk a bit about where Eric's case is at right now? You mentioned that he's scheduled for release early next year, so six months more. But obviously, you've alluded to in past shows we've talked about, and we talked with Eric also about the case that he was facing around the assault on guard, and he was being shipped around from facility to facility. And last that I knew he was being held at the most secure nightmare prison in the United States, ADX Florence. Can you talk about his condition and where things are at, as far as you know, with his release and his conditions?

JD: Absolutely. Eric is still being held at the most restrictive prison in the country, Florence ADMAX. He's scheduled to be released on February 23, 2024. We just found out this week that his bond pending appeal was denied by a judge, meaning that while Eric is eligible right now for home confinement, or for a halfway house, the judge is denying it, meaning they're just trying to keep them in the strictest, most repressive confinement they can until the last possible chance that they can. Which if anything, is just vindictive and cruel, but that is par for the course during his decade in prison. He's doing okay, he's surviving. I know he's watching a ton of Jeopardy. So when he gets out, he'll be extremely knowledgeable. And he's looking forward to promoting this book and to possibly having a related podcast and really just getting involved and doing all the things he wasn't able to do for the last decade.

TFSR: Yeah, I can't wait for him to get out and for that stress to be relieved off of him and his family. It's incredible. Just with the inside-outside part of it, it's awesome how much... It's really easy for

people to forget the agency that people who are behind bars have and the participation that they can and do engage with the movement. Going back to some of the historical anti-colonial movements, in Ireland, for instance, as an example, or Palestine, the continued relationship between people inside and outside is really gratifying and illuminating. And for me, it just goes against... So if the purpose of the state's carceral project is to break up communities and separate people from their communities, break up movements and take that energy and soul away, by refusing that disconnect, by engaging people that are behind bars alongside people that are on the outside, and being there and present not only to support someone throughout the process but also to re-welcome them back and help them work through the traumas that the state imposed on them once their bid is done, is really the sign of a strong social movement. And I can't imagine us winning any other way.

JD: Absolutely. Beautifully said. And I couldn't agree more. I was just talking to some friends in Northern Ireland, some former political prisoners, and they're very excited about this book. The same with some comrades in Palestine. It's Eric's hope, it's our hope, that this book is just the beginning and that it opened doors for people that are repressed to share their stories and to raise their voices.

TFSR: Back to *Rattling the Cages*. Could you speak about the approach that y'all took with the political prisoners and former political prisoners and prisoners of war that you spoke with? Some people who went away because they were involved in a political movement, what we call political prisoners, or the terminology of social prisoners who became politicized while on the inside and also received repression for their organizing or speaking out activities. How did you decide who to reach out to? And what was your methodology in approaching the subject matter? What questions did you ask?

JD: Sure, great questions. So initially, the project started with Eric sending me about 30 questions that he thought would be good to ask people who were willing to contribute. I paired that down to about 24-25 questions.

and I put it into three different categories: prison life, politics and prison dynamics, and looking forward. And each of the interviews is composed of those three sections. And then the interviews were done via Zoom, via letter, phone call, anyway that I could really get in touch with these particular people. There were follow-up questions, which I was able to ask in person, on phone calls, or Zoom calls, but for people in prison that entailed a lot of writing back and forth and clarifying certain things. There was a lot of back and forth to ensure that what people were saying was accurate and was what they meant, including any edits and things like that. As far as people to reach out to, I did cast the net pretty wide. Probably a little more than half of the people I reached out to responded. There were some key people that passed away during the time that this book was made that we were really hoping to capture their experiences and their voices, including Maroon Shoatz, Mutulu Shakur, Kathy Boudin, several others. We really cast the net as wide as possible. And we really got a really diverse group of people that were willing to participate, and I'm really proud of the list of contributors that we do have.

TFSR: Yeah, I wanted to ask about that. You've got such a span of voices from different movements, different demographic experiences, from all across the continent, in different types of incarceration, too, from provincial or state levels to federal US or Canadian prisons to county jails, US military, and incarcerated at different times. And you can hear little bits and pieces of the experience from Jalil Muntaqim or James Kilgore, the experiences of over decades at various points being incarcerated, or being incarcerated at different ages coming into the prison systems and different prison systems, or different gender prisons. It paints a big picture... Or trans folks in prison. It creates a really interesting opportunity to survey how incarceration has changed or differs in these different contexts. I wonder if you had thoughts on that aspect in particular or if you've gotten feedback on that.

JD: Well, there hasn't been much feedback yet. The book is still in pre-release. And there's only been a handful of people who have read it. So I'm excited for more people to read it and to hear what they do think. You're right, though, it's a wide and diverse group of people that I was able to interview.

Some of them went to prison in the early 1970s and weren't released until the last five years or so. Some are still locked up today and were imprisoned in the early 70s. I spoke with others who were incarcerated more recently, one who spent a year on Rikers Island. Most of the people I interviewed were incarcerated or are incarcerated in the United States, but Ann Hansen is one that was imprisoned in Canada related to the Direct Action Movement. And the juxtaposition of these voices shows the breadth and depth of our carceral system and the people that it's willing to go after. The book really is a timeline of state repression and abuse, but also of resistance and love and struggle. I'm really proud of the diversity included. But also, like I said, Eric sees this book as the beginning. So hopefully, we're able to include more diverse and other voices in future versions of this book.

TFSR: Were there any responses that really surprised you? I shouldn't be surprised, I guess, but there were stories about birds that showed up in at least Rebecca Rubin and Oso Blanco's stories. That was really moving. Birds are one of these animals that's able to get over the fences and show up outside of people's windows or in the yard. And they also are so symbolic to people, whether spiritually or just in terms of something that's able to get above and beyond. Birds are definitely a huge part of the imagery of surpassing the limits imposed by prisons in our artwork. So this direct opportunity to personally interface with nature, despite all the attempts of the guards and the razor wire and everything, and opportunities to show kindness. Those are two examples that just popped into my head. But I wonder if any other surprising stories came up, particularly if they were shared by people who were incarcerated in different situations because that shows a lot about the spirit of resistance and liberation that's shared among the voices you provide in the book.

JD: Yeah, that's really interesting. And if you'll remember, during Eric's assault trial with the BOP [Bureau of Prisons]. They claimed that a bird flew into his cell and flooded his cell and knocked over coffee and whatnot. But you're right, the absence of wildlife and natural environments within the prison system, it's intentional, and it's part of the dehumanizing process of our carceral system. And when Rebecca Rubin and Oso Blanco speak of

saving birds and protecting animals where they are when they're held in prison, it's not only really moving, but it's symbolic of their resistance as political prisoners in the face of the state repression that they face in prison, that they're willing to put themselves at risk to protect life, to protect animals, to protect the environment, in whatever way they can, which is in stark contrast to our carceral system. In terms of other surprising responses, I'll say that many people I interviewed spoke of joy, spoke of the joy that they found as revolutionaries in continuing to resist the system, even while incarcerated. The carceral system dehumanizes people as much as it possibly can. And the people I interviewed found joy in building relationships and promoting revolutionary change and political education and just in every chance they got to be human with other people behind prison bars. And that really struck me as something important that I wasn't necessarily expecting.

TFSR: So right now we're in a period of presales for the book that's going to benefit the ABC Federation War Chest. And I know we've talked about that project on the show before but if you could talk a little bit about ABC-F and the war chest, where the money goes...

JD: *Rattling the Cages* is a fundraiser for and a way to raise awareness of those in prison for politically motivated actions. As sch proceeds for any book sales are split between the ABC war chest and Eric. So the ABC war chest, that's the Anarchist Black Cross war chest, has been around for several decades now. I believe it's been active in the US since the mid-80s, probably, and they provide a monthly stipend to political prisoners that are currently serving time. They put money on their books so that they're able to buy things from the commissary, help others around them, and not be in need. So any proceeds from the book will be split between that war chest and Eric so that he has, hopefully, some financial cushion when he is finally released from prison. But in addition to that, if you buy the book now as a pre-order, before September 18, at Burning Books or AK Press (and I'll get those websites in momentarily), the book is not only 15% off but \$5 from each book sold will be donated to Running Down the Walls, which is the Anarchist Black Cross annual 5k fundraiser happening this year on September 17 in places all across Turtle Island.

TFSR: Cool. For folks that are just hearing about the Running Down the Walls, can you talk a bit about those events? Who can participate and how one participates in it?

JD: Sure. The name is a bit ablest, you don't actually have to be able to run, you can push down the walls, and you can do whatever you can, as long as you're there. Last year, I was in Philly. And it was a really amazing event. There were hundreds of people, including former political prisoners. This year, I'll be at the Seattle event. But there are events in New York City, Chicago, Portland, Oregon, Seattle, and LA... They're all over the place. And there's a website, ABCF.net, where you can find specific locations for Running Down the Walls. It's a really amazing event. You'll find different reading materials and different tabling organizations there. I can't recommend it enough.

TFSR: And it seems from past events, there have been speakers from Jericho Movement and former political prisoners, and also folks from ABC and from other prisoners support and anti-repression groups that actually talk. So if you're in one of those cities and you're looking to get involved in anti-repression work or meet some movement elders, or both, this seems a really good opportunity for that.

JD: Absolutely. Last year Jihad Abdulmumit with the Jericho Movement gave a great speech at the Philly Running Down the Walls. This year, I know several members of the George Jackson Brigade are planning to be at the Seattle event. So yeah, hopefully, there's a great turnout. And there will be *Rattling the Cages* postcards at most of those events.

TFSR: Nice. Because this is an interfacing event that we're talking about, as well as a fundraiser, Running Down the Walls, would you care to mark any releases of incarcerated comrades or anyone moving on to their ancestors? You've named a few earlier, but it would be nice to make space if you want that.

JD: Absolutely. Thank you. Sadly, there have been many political prisoners, current or former, who have passed away just while Eric and I've been

working on this book, which has been the last three or four years. They are Russell Maroon Shoatz, Bo Brown, Romaine “Chip” Fitzgerald, Thomas “Blood” McCreary, Kathy Boudin, Albert Woodfox, Marshall “Eddie” Conway, and Dr. Mutulu Shakur. And they were all amazing people and amazing revolutionaries. The last two, Eddie Conway and Mutulu Shakur, were both from Baltimore, which is where I lived for a long time. And I got to know Eddie fairly well. They’re all really amazing people and they did amazing work during their lives. On a lighter note in terms of release, Ruchell “Cinque” Magee was finally released in the summer. He was imprisoned in 1963, which means he spent 60 years in prison. He was Angela Davis’ co-defendant following the failed Marin County Court kidnapping by Jonathan Jackson. And he’s been in prison for longer than many of us have been alive. So it’s amazing to finally see him walk out as a free person.

TFSR: For sure. At the top of the interview, you mentioned projects that you work with, and one of them was Certain Days :Freedom for Political Prisoners Calendar. Would you mind talking about where that project is at in its yearly cycle and if there are still chances for people to kick in or preorder?

JD: The 2024 Certain Days calendar is in production. We are working on it. We are unfortunately a little bit slower, a little bit behind schedule, more so than in previous years. But we’ve got an amazing collection of contributors, both artists and writers. And we’re really looking forward to finalizing it and getting it out into the world as soon as possible. Hopefully, pre-orders will be up in the next week or so. So you can go to Burning Books and order the calendar and the book and get some free shipping. But like I said, we do have an amazing list of contributors and I’ll just name a few of them. We’ve got Leonard Peltier, Dr. Tolbert Small, Zane McNeill, Dominique Conway (who is Eddie Conway’s partner), Eric King, David Gilbert, Ed Mead, N.O. Bonzo, Josh McPhee, Jessica Sabogal. Xinachtli, Ricardo Levins Morales, and so many more. So we’re really looking forward to releasing this. And we hope that it sells well, as it has done in previous years. And for those who pay close attention, you may notice in the text boxes on each month’s page some quotes from the *Rattling the Cages* book.

TFSR: Nice cross-posting. Was there anything else that I didn't ask about that you wanted to talk about?

JD: No, not really. Thank you for all the great questions. I do have a couple of websites that I can just shout out if people want to access them. SupportEricKing.org, CertainDays.org, BurningBooks.com, AK Press.org. And then for Running Down the Walls, it's <https://www.abcf.net/blog/running-down-the-walls-2023/>.

TFSR: Awesome. Well, thank you so much, Josh, I really appreciate the work that you're involved in, as well as making this conversation happen.

JD: Absolutely. Thank you, Bursts. Thanks for continuing to do this.

TFSR: Yeah, my pleasure.

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